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SUBJECT: SERBIA: SPEAKER CALLS FOR PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS BEGINNING  
JANUARY 20

REFS: A. Belgrade 1504 B. Belgrade 1552

Summary

1. (SBU) Serbia's Parliament Speaker Oliver Dulic on December 12 formally called for presidential elections, setting the first round of voting for January 20, 2008 and runoff for February 3. In announcing elections, Dulic, a member of the President's Democratic Party (DS), fulfilled a legal mandate, but defied coalition partner, the Prime Minister's Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS) which was holding out for an announcement following an expected December 19 UN Security Council meeting dedicated to the Troika report on Kosovo status. The announcement signaled the start of what will likely be a tough presidential race, pitting President Tadic against the radicals, opposition partners, and perhaps his own coalition partner. End Summary.

Speaker Calls for January Elections

2. (U) Parliament Speaker Dulic appeared on national television on December 12 to call for election of the President of Serbia and to establish January 20, 2008 as the date of the first round of voting. In announcing elections, Dulic fulfilled a mandate under Serbia's Constitution Law of 2006 that required him to call presidential elections no later than December 31. The law also required enactment of a body of legislation on the presidency and elections, defense, the army, security services, and foreign affairs prior to the announcement of elections, and Serbia's parliamentarians worked long into the night this week, passing the last of the requisite bills on December 10.

Fragile Democratic Coalition Strained

3. (SBU) Dulic's announcement apparently does not signal support of all coalition partners. Although Prime Minister Kostunica's DSS and President Tadic's Democratic Party (DS) had agreed to go forward with elections, they differed on the timing of the announcement. On December 10, a DSS spokesperson announced that the party's preferred to wait until after the UN Security Council's December 19 meeting on Kosovo before setting the election schedule. In a conversation with poloff on December 11, Dulic (DS) said that the coalition partners were negotiating throughout the afternoon to resolve their differences, and he was optimistic that they would find a way forward. Nonetheless, after the Speaker informed the parties of the Parliament of his intention to call elections, shortly before he publicly informed the press on Dec 12, the media reported the DSS's "disappointment." B92 Radio broadcast one DSS member's warning that the party would consider "appropriate counter measures." Party Whip Milos Aligrudic said, on television, that DSS had not been consulted, and called the Speaker's act a "severe violation of the

coalition agreement," and suggested that the DSS would respond accordingly, but not before December 19.

¶4. (U) In the press conference Dulic convened to announce the election dates, the Speaker explained that he made his announcement in compliance with the laws of Serbia. Noting that "all elections are a celebration of democracy" and an opportunity to empower and strengthen Serbian institutions," Dulic urged the people of Serbia to vote.

The Open Back Door  
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¶5. (SBU) In coalition discussions in early November (reftels) the Prime Minister acquiesced to a January vote, but stipulated that elections might not go forward in the presence of a threat to Serbia's territorial integrity. Although there exists no legal grounds for such a qualification or even an established mechanism to make a determination of a threat, DSS members, in the month since the PM's announcement, have consistently and exclusively defined this "threat" as a universal declaration of Kosovo's independence. Parliamentarians from all sides of the aisle expect that Kostunica would have a strong chance of passing legislation necessary to establish legal grounds for stopping elections. Alternatively, Kostunica could seek Dulic's removal, but doing so would likely break the democratic coalition.

Comment  
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¶6. (SBU) The Speaker's announcement was critically timed with Kosovo in mind -- to precede meetings of the EU Council and the UN Security Council, set for December 13-14 and 19, respectively. Firm election dates set the stage for Europeans and others to delay announcing Kosovo independence until after Tadic's reelection is

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well in hand. On December 11, President Tadic told the Ambassador that he hoped we would refrain from public statements linking elections and Kosovo. He noted that French Foreign Minister Kouchner had recently commented that Europe would delay UDI in order to help Tadic's reelection chances -- "it may be true," said the President, "but better left unsaid by foreign leaders" for the sake of his campaign.

¶7. (SBU) In calling for elections without the Prime Minister's blessing, Tadic displayed resolve that his party strength (the numbers, that is) justifies but that he rarely exercises. He will need considerable backbone to stand up to Kostunica in the weeks ahead.

MUNTER